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THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

JUNE 1st, 1865.

CARL MARIA VON WEBER.

The Life of an Artist, from the German of his Son, Baron Max von Weber. By J. PALGRAVE SIMPSON, M.A. 2 vols. Chapman and Hall.

(SECOND NOTICE.)

DRESDEN, at the time Weber took up his residence there, was exclusively subject to court influences, the people having little or no opinion apart from the aristocratic fashion of the hour; and a "dull respectability" reigning supreme, even in those large gatherings where the national character is rarely disguised. Art was an exclusive luxury; and, with the exception of the literary society, nicknamed "The Poet's Tea," few persons were found in the city who cared to exchange ideas where a dead level of thought was looked upon as the true sign of good breeding. Music was somewhat encouraged, but almost solely in the form of Italian Opera; the German view of art being thoroughly opposed to the feelings of the aristocratic party which, as we have said, ruled the taste of the people. A desire for German Opera, however, was already springing up amongst the bold dissenters from the established faith; and Weber resolved, in spite of the powerful opposition he had to encounter, to grapple with the difficulties, and to place German art before the people so that they might have a fair opportunity of judging dispassionately of its claim to their sympathy and support. In this desire he had not only to fight boldly against the antipathy of the nobility to an establishment bearing "a vulgar German name," and the rivalry of the whole of the Italian artists, but against the personal and powerful opposition of Francesco Morlacchi, who was placed at the head of the well-disciplined Italian Opera; and who, of course, therefore, regarded Weber as an invader of his rights and privileges. No sooner, however, was the new "Capellmeister" fairly installed in office than he resolved to show that the object he had at heart was not to be crushed either by open hostility or by secret intrigue. To the members of his company, after a few words of friendly greeting, and assurances of his interest in them all, he said, "In return, I expect implicit obedience. I shall be just, but pitilessly severe with all who need severity, myself among the number." No such words as these had been heard by the oldest person in the theatre; many declared at once against the "impertinent young musical director;" and yet it is related that such was the power of this real disciple of German art, that many who were at this time his bitterest enemies became afterwards his firmest friends and supporters. Some of the

members of the Dresden Orchestra are still living, who perfectly remember the appearance of Weber on his appointment as "Capellmeister;" and it is interesting to read how his portrait is sketched by them on his assuming the post of conductor. "He stood in the midst of them," it is said, "a little narrow-chested man, with long arms, and a thin pale face, from which his eyes gleamed forth in lightning flashes through his spectacles. When he was pleased, a smile, which was positively enchanting, played over his otherwise serious mouth; when affected by the occurrence of the moment, he bent his head gently sideways, with an air of peculiar tenderness and earnestness. He wore a blue frock-coat with metal buttons, tight pantaloons, and Hessian boots with tassels. A scrupulously clean white cravat, with embroidered ends, in which was stuck a handsome diamond pin, encircled his neck. Over all he carried a tawny-coloured cloak with several capes, a broad round hat on his head. Nothing in his whole attire indicated any artistic pretension or affectation; and in the streets, or in a room, he might have easily been overlooked. Once remarked, however, Weber was sure to charm and captivate by his air of intellectual refinement and elegance of manner." Such was the unpretending appearance of the man who was destined not only to place German Opera upon a sure footing in a great capital where Italian music had hitherto held a despotic power, but to create in his own person the most undying and perfect specimens of the school to which he had sworn allegiance. To show that Weber did not intend to accomplish a reformation in art by truckling to those who had been foremost in supporting its abuses, he commenced by publishing an article in the *Abendzeitung*, in which he expounded his own views upon the establishment of a German Opera, and boldly told the people what they had to hope and expect from his conductorship. To this article he signed his name; and it may reasonably be expected that, emanating as it did from a court official, it fell upon the public of Dresden like a thunderbolt. "My programme-article," wrote Weber to Caroline Brandt, "has created a great sensation—petrification and terror on the one hand, pleasure and respect on the other. All right! The good ones of the earth begin to love me, and the bad ones to fear me."

The first opera produced at Dresden, under Weber's direction, was Mehul's *Joseph and his brethren*, the rehearsals for which had been directed by the enthusiastic conductor with such energy and perseverance that every member of the establishment, even to the wardrobe-keeper, seemed to feel the absolute necessity of an individual exertion hitherto unknown in the enervating atmosphere of the Dresden Opera. On the first evening the King, on entering his box, said, "If the representation goes well,

Weber deserves all credit." The opera was an enormous success; so much light and shade were never before observed by the singers. Such scenery and dresses had never before been seen; and when it is stated that Weber, in addition to the attention bestowed upon the music, had diligently hunted through all the great works on Egypt in the Royal Library, it may be imagined what accuracy had been obtained in the minutest details of the work. "It was remarked by all," it is stated, "that the King, who had a very good ear, and was accustomed to cough impatiently when anything displeased him, had never once uttered the ominous sound." The cessation of his Majesty's cough for the entire evening, therefore, gave Dresden a German Opera, and the new Capellmeister received the reward for his unwearied exertions in the cause.

The little artistic society, known by the name of "The Poet's Tea," was a great favourite of Weber's; for it was here that he could commune with those whose mind had not been lowered to the standard enjoined by the parasites of the King. It was in this congenial circle, too, that he first met the poet Frederick Kind, who was destined to be the means of drawing forth the genius in the young composer, which seemed to have been for years struggling for utterance. The legend of "*Der Freischütz*" had fascinated Weber, and Kind grew equally enthusiastic over the romantic details of the story. The composer had evidently found the very plot that fitted the music he longed to write; and when the words were before him, "melodies poured forth to greet them," as he said, "of their own accord." Within a week of his first conference with Kind the first act was sent to him. "I've got my first act," he wrote to Caroline; "it is charming. Kind hopes to have the whole ready in another fortnight. I shall then have the whole manuscript copied and sent off to you. I am very curious to hear what you will say to it. You are not easily pleased, I know, you little pug; and you will require something very super-extra for your old boy. Well! This is super-extra; for there's the very deuce in it. He appears as the "Black Huntsman;" and balls are made in a ravine at midnight, with spectral appearances around. Haven't I made your flesh creep upon your bones, eh?" Kind worked hard at the *libretto*, for in ten days he completed the whole book; and the title having been changed from "The Trial Shot" to "The Jäger's Bride," it was copied out and sent to Caroline Brandt, who suggested several very judicious alterations, which were immediately adopted. Indeed, the clear judgment and good sense of his intended were often of the utmost service to Weber; and his firm reliance upon the advice of his "public with two eyes," as he often playfully called her, showed how thoroughly he appreciated its value.

But the powerful opposition of his rival Morlacchi, who could not restrain his ill-feeling at the success of Weber's attempts to found a German Opera in a city, over which he had hitherto exercised an undisputed control, left him but little time for composition; and, indeed, the plots and counterplots of the Italian party would be somewhat tedious, graphically as they are described, did they not form important links in the chain of events which gradually led to the cultivation of a healthy and independent musical taste amongst a people previously slaves to the fashion set by their rulers. Whenever, however, these petty disagreements had subsided, "*Der Freischütz*" was uppermost in Weber's mind. In fact, the subject had so taken possession of him that the music seemed to "grow" rather than to be composed; and no better criticism could be written on it than was expressed by the innocent words of Kind, who afterwards became unfriendly to the composer; "I cannot see," he said, "what there is in the melody of "*The Bridesmaids' Chorus*" to make such a wondrous fuss about! Why, from the very words it could not have been otherwise. Every man would have hit upon the same idea."

Weber's marriage for a time put a stop to the progress of the opera; and on his return from a short tour with his bride, he was actively employed in rehearsals of Mozart's *Seraglio*, which was a great favourite of his. In a beautiful rustic home, to which he became deeply attached, standing in a garden on the road from Dresden to Pillnitz, and overlooking a charming prospect, the happiest days of Weber's life were passed. Here the greater portions of *Der Freischütz*, *Euryanthe*, and *Oberon* were composed. The realization of his earthly paradise had evidently calmed his feelings; so that, even with his declining health, and painfully nervous temperament he contrived to work at his art with renewed vigour. He would compose, it is said, "at the open window of his room, now and then calling 'Poppet,' to his young wife, as she sat occupied with tapestry or needlework in the little garden arbour, and eliciting a nod of the head, a kiss from the hand, or a smile; then when all was over, throw aside his long coat, hurry down into the garden, and stretching out his arms in the fresh, warm summer air, cry joyously, 'Where is there a happier fellow than I?'"

The title, *Der Freischütz*, was substituted for that of the "*Jäger's Bride*," soon after the score of the opera was despatched to Berlin; but it was some time before all the difficulties connected with its production could be effectually removed. Only a small portion of the work had ever been heard even by Weber's most intimate friends; but, at a concert at Dresden, Weber resolved to have the overture performed. The result was as might have been expected. Critics and musicians shook their heads with doubt,

and the applause was scanty. The novelty of the instrumental effects did not suit the taste of those who judged all works by a conventional standard of their own creation. Weber alone listened, and was satisfied. Like Beethoven, who *saw*—though he could not *hear*—the sage Viennese public laugh at his *Fidelio*, the composer of *Der Freischütz* knew that he had spoken the truth, and that the world must, sooner or later, receive it. "I am prepared to hear," he wrote to Lichtenstein, "that there is much which was never known on any stage before, much which will not be comprehended at once; but, please God, I have hit the right thing."

When Weber arrived in Berlin, to superintend the production of his opera, he found that to ensure a perfect representation of the work, it was necessary to give almost as much attention to the scenery and decorations as to the music. The spectral part of the opera had been too timidly treated by the scene-painter and machinist to suit the views of the composer. No half measures would fit the music of the Wolf's Glen. "Your intentions are too delicate," he said, "for such a subject. They would be more fitting for *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. What has my music to do with misty forms and grinning rocks? Give me my owl with flaming eyes, real fluttering bats; spare neither spectres or skeletons; and let the horrors go *crescendo* by every ball."

On the first night of the opera crowds assembled at the entrance of the Schauspielhaus four hours before the opening of the doors, and soon after the people were admitted every seat in the house was occupied. The appearance of Weber was the signal for a burst of enthusiasm, and it was some time before the conductor could command sufficient silence to commence. The overture, so suggestive of the subject of the opera, and so wonderfully imaginative in its treatment, spoke to every listener with a power so irresistible as to elicit an universal demand for its repetition. As the opera proceeded the effect was more and more apparent; and the grand scena, "Wie nacht' mir der Schlummer" so thoroughly took the house by storm, that even the Italian opposing party surrendered and joined in the general applause. The supernatural effects of the Wolf's Glen completed the triumph; and Weber was called upon the stage, and almost overpowered with applause, copies of verses, and flowers. *Der Freischütz* had been proclaimed with one voice the commencement of a new era in German Operatic Music, and Weber had in a single evening attained the pinnacle of his fame. Critics, however, who are too apt to consider that they lower their dignity by siding with the general public, were not so easily to be persuaded of the advent of a new genius. Zelter, in writing to Goethe, treated the subject with derision; admitted that the

music was in some respects "good," but ascribed the success to the "craze of women and children," and summed up his judgment by declaring that "out of nothing the composer had created a nothing of colossal size." Tieck spoke of the opera as "the most unmusical row that ever roared upon a stage;" and it is well known that Spohr, even, could never comprehend what he termed the "riddle" of Weber's wonderful success, and could only explain it by the "gift" he possessed to "write for the general masses." Time has long since decided the value of these opinions; but it is well for art that genius creates its public, and works fearlessly on till the time arrives for its due recognition. Nobody strove more zealously than Weber to protect the operatic stage from the baneful effects of the "ear-tickling school," which seemed insidiously to be driving true art from the boards. Writing to Gottfried Weber of Meyerbeer's opera *Margaret of Anjou*, he says, "Meyerbeer is losing himself more and more, alas, in that miserable Italian slough. What a beautiful blossom has been withered there! What hopes are lost! Oh that accursed thirst to please—only to please!" Meyerbeer's career has proved that Weber's fears were groundless; but his intense desire that a fellow artist should not barter his genius for present fame proves how thoroughly unselfish was the ambition of his life.

We have said nothing of *Preciosa* and *Euryanthe*—the former produced at Berlin, immediately before *Der Freischütz*, and the latter at Vienna, when the "Germano-Italian War" was at its height—because, although both works were eminently successful, *Der Freischütz* was the opera in which Weber most thoroughly poured out his whole genius, and which (partly perhaps because the story so thoroughly took possession of his mind before the *libretto* was written) he has more particularly stamped with his individuality.

The last scene of Weber's career is a sad one to tell; but linked as it is with the composition and production of one of his greatest operas, it bears the highest interest to artists. Although gradually, but too surely, hastening to his end, he entered into negotiations with Charles Kemble, then lessee of Covent Garden Theatre, in London, to compose and conduct the first performances of *Oberon*; and after various letters had passed on the subject, the *libretto* was sent to him by Mr. Planché, the author, and he at once entered on his task. When the music was completed, he was ready for his journey to England. Painfully conscious that death was almost upon him, he threw his remaining strength into the work, as the last chance of providing for his wife and family. During the preparations for his departure, it is related that his appearance became so changed that his intimate friends feared that he would

not reach England alive. "His form sank together: his voice was almost totally gone: his cough was incessant." When sitting at the tea-table, which he had so often enlivened with his genial conversation, he would often faintly say, "Don't take it ill, good people, if I drop asleep: indeed I cannot help it," and his head would fall upon his breast. Nevertheless his presence was expected in London, and, urged by a strict sense of duty, he went. The parting with his wife was painful in the extreme; and when the door of his travelling carriage was closed, the poor sobbing Caroline rushed into her room, and sank on her knees with the cry, "It is his coffin I heard closed upon him." London was reached; and at the house of the good and true friend to artists, Sir George Smart, Weber found a home and a cordial welcome.

There is no need to dwell on the success of *Oberon*. Whilst trembling on the stage, where he had been summoned by the audience on the first night, the brilliancy of his triumph almost inspired him with a hope that enough of life might yet remain at least to join his wife and children once more in Germany. But the reaction came; and at the zenith of his fame, the world was gradually closing upon him. Even at this time he arranged his *Jubilee Cantata* to English words; and actually sat in his chair during the rehearsal, although scarcely able to raise his voice above a whisper. At his concert, which, in consequence of counter attractions, was very thinly attended, he accompanied a composition of his for the last time, and was soon afterwards, in an exhausted state, led from the room. Then came his strong, painfully earnest desire to get home once more: to see his wife and children, and speak to them with his remaining breath. He had arranged his departure for the next morning, and retired to rest murmuring, "God reward you all for your kind love to me." In the morning the servant knocked at his door twice, but received no answer. Sir George Smart and his friend Fürstenau, who had accompanied him from Germany, were summoned in haste, and the door was broken open. On the bed lay Weber—dead—but as if in a tranquil sleep, with his head resting on his left hand. No trace of pain or suffering could be observed; and that fond yearning for home, which had clung to him through life, seemed revealed by the placid and hopeful expression of his features in death.

If anything could calm the feelings of his widow and children at the melancholy news of Weber's death in a foreign land, it must have been the consciousness that he was treated with the utmost kindness and consideration by all who knew him; and that after his decease every respect was paid to his memory, both as an artist and a man. It was not to be expected, however, that his countrymen would allow his remains to rest permanently on English soil. A public sub-

scription was opened, a committee appointed, and eventually Weber's body was conveyed to Dresden. Thus, at length, were the two most earnest wishes of his life fulfilled—that his body should finally rest in his German home, and his music in the eternal heart of the German people.

ROYAL ITALIAN OPERA.

MADLLE. ADELINA PATTI has re-appeared at this establishment, singing with even increased effect since we last heard her, and earning by the most legitimate means the cordial reception she met with. The revival of *L'Étoile du Nord* suffers from the absence of Madame Miolhan Carvalho, the part of *Caterina* being beyond the powers of Madame Vandenheuvel. M. Hilaire, too, the tenor, can only feebly supply the gap until a more commanding artist can be found. The scenery and stage appointments were as perfect as ever; and the opera, even with the present cast, is likely to prove extremely attractive. In Flotow's *Martha*, Madlle. Fioretti has been singing with the utmost success; and we sincerely trust that so accomplished an artist may not again suddenly disappear in that remarkable manner so peculiar to the female vocalists at this establishment. Signor Brignoli, in the tenor part, displayed a fine voice and good style, and we have every hope that good use may be made of him during the season.

HER MAJESTY'S THEATRE.

The opening night of the present season introduced us to a clever young *debutante*, Madlle. Laura Harris, from New York, who, although unequal in power to the part of *Amina*, in *La Sonnambula*, displayed a very chaste style of vocalisation, and at once secured the sympathies of the audience by her modest and unassuming demeanour. The tenor, Signor Carrion, is a robust singer, of a school scarcely suited to the sentimental music of the love-sick *Elvino*; but he proved himself thoroughly equal to the part, and is likely to establish himself as a favourite with the audience. Mr. Santley sang the somewhat thankless music of *Count Rodolpho* with the conscientiousness of a thorough artist; and he was warmly welcomed on his return to the establishment where he has so steadily won his fame.

The young Russian *prima donna*, Madlle. Ilma de Murska, who made her *débüt* as *Lucia*, has achieved an enormous success. To a really fine and pure *soprano* voice, she unites very superior histrionic powers; and her reception was such as we have latterly been unaccustomed to in our opera houses. M. Joulain, the new French tenor, will scarcely reconcile us to the loss of Signor Giuglini (whose appearance this season appears extremely doubtful), but he sang well enough to secure a permanent place as a member of the company. Madlle. Titens has returned to us in fine voice; and the revival of *Fidelio* has proved that the opera has lost nothing of its attraction with the subscribers and the public. We look forward with much interest to the production of Cherubini's *Medea*, when an opportunity will be afforded of hearing Madlle. Titens in a part entirely new to us.

CRYSTAL PALACE.

As we anticipated, Beethoven's Choral Symphony has now become one of the standard compositions in the programme at these concerts; the deep meaning of this colossal work gradually unfolding itself to the hearers at each successive representation. We are pleased also to record that the semi-aristocratic Saturday audience will not have the exclusive privilege of enjoying this masterpiece of Beethoven, as it has been already given on one of the regular shilling days. We cannot but regret that the "Opera Concerts" have commenced; for really admirable as they are, the disconnected scraps from well